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ABSTRACT

Although the Hispanic woman finds herself in a minority status within a minority population, her persistence and resiliency attest to her readiness for change. She bears the triple brunt of sexism, racism, and colonialism. She is victimized by poverty, prejudice and rejection by the dominant population. Like women in the population at large, her income is far below that of males, the expectancy levels for her achievement are quite low, and she finds she is often rejected as a fully participating citizen. Being a minority, as well as a woman, she has low social status and consequently low self-esteem. Her language is often mistaken for illiteracy or, at least, is the sign of the unwanted immigrant. Although her educational attainment is lower than that of women in general and that of Hispanic men, there are some hopeful signs. Her participation in secondary education is on the rise and increased education is a key element in improving her chances for jobs not presently open to her. (Author/WI)

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# PUERTORRIQUEÑAS AS HISPANICS IN THE UNITED STATES

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE SIXTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON ETHNIC AND MINORITY STUDIES - "WOMEN AND ETHNICITY"

by LOURDES MIRANDA KING

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ABSTRACT

PUERTORRIQUEÑAS AS HISPANICS IN THE UNITED STATES

by LOURDES MIRANDA KING

Although the Hispanic woman finds herself in a minority status within a minority population of the United States, her persistence and resiliency in the face of the obstacles she has encountered attest to her readiness for change. She bears the triple brunt of sexism, racism and colonialism. Too often she is victimized by poverty, prejudice and rejection by the dominant population. The paper traces Hispanic women's evolvement from their point of origin to her stable presence in the United States.

Like her counterpart in the population at large, her income is far below that for males, the expectancy levels for her achievement are quite low, and she finds she is often rejected as a fully participating citizen. Being a minority, as well as a woman, her feminine status too often places her in an unconscionably low social role and status, and consequent low self-esteem. Her language is often mistaken for illiteracy or as a sign of the unwanted immigrant.

Although her educational attainment is lower than women in general, and Hispanic men, there are some hopeful signs. Her participation in secondary and higher education is on the rise, and increased education is a key element in improving her chances for jobs not always open to her at present.

A hopeful sign for the future of latinas in the U.S. is her relative youth. Because she tends to be young it may be possible to break some of the detrimental cycles through which her predecessors have passed. The primary avenues are education and equitable treatment in employment.

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Four years ago I wrote:

"The Puerto Rican woman in the United States then is caught between two forces. On the one hand, she is entrapped within the bleak economic and political powerlessness affecting the Puerto Rican population in general. On the other hand, she suffers from the socialization of sex roles which causes her to have guilt feelings about the fulfillment of her potential and its expression in a society which looks down its aquiline Anglo nose at her and her people."

(Puertorriqueñas in the United States: The Impact of Double Discrimination", Civil Rights Digest, Spring 1974.)

It is from the perspective gained in the time elapsed that I will comment on her situation today within the broader framework of the Hispana in the United States. Given her relatively unchanging situation in the past several years, we need to outline some strategies aimed at moving the Hispanic woman toward full realization of her potential, subject of a forthcoming paper.

The identity of the author derives from being a Puertorriqueña. But the bond born from the shared experience of the struggle for survival which Hispanic communities have faced, as well as the commonality in historical relationship to the United States, and the colonization heritage, justifies the expansion of my previous observations to encompass all Hispanic women in the United States.

## Why the Hispanic Women?

The study of women in history and society is still in its infancy, although rapidly acquiring an aura of respectability. The worldwide social movement for equality unearthed the need for the systematic study of the role women occupy in society.[1] Long neglected by historians as perhaps too insubstantial to

merit serious investigation, information on half of the population of the universe is woefully sparse.

We have experienced this decade a social revolution which will be chronicled as one of the most important social changes to take place in this century -- one which has changed the lives of men, women and children. These changes have outpaced the required changes in the social institutions which control our lives -- the individual's progression along the human cycle of birth, childhood, adulthood and death -- creating a blatant disparity between how people are trying to lead their lives and how institutions operate.

If the study of women overall has been neglected, if the situation of women throughout the world prompted the United Nations to proclaim an International Women's Year (1975), a Decade for Women (1975-1985), and a World Plan of Action, and if in the United States a National Plan of Action was recently presented to the President and the Congress, then clearly equality and full participation by women in the economic, social and political life of this planet is still a dream. Despite differences in legislation, development and progress, the status of women from one country to another, and yet within each country according to social class, the sad reality is that nearly two-thirds of the world's 800 million illiterates are women. Daily millions of women go to bed exhausted, often times hungry, after a longer day than men. Although 46 percent of the world's labor force are women, the majority are concentrated at the lowest occupational levels with limited access to education, employment, housing, health care and leadership opportunities.[2]

Given this condition for the women of the world who are rooted in their own individual societies, what could be the condition of women in the United States who are members of an exploited, uprooted community?

Who are the Hispanic Women?

When defining who is the Hispanic woman in the U.S., we need to travel the historical road which has brought us to our present circumstances. Today, the Bureau of the Census identifies us as belonging to 5.3 percent of the total U.S. population -- a percentage representing over 11 million Hispanics. Of this total, 59 percent are of Mexican American origin, 16 percent are of Puerto Rican origin (excluding Puerto Rico's two million inhabitants), 19 percent are of Central, South American or other Spanish origin, and 6 percent are of Cuban origin.[3]

Their geographic backgrounds are as varied as their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds: immigrants from Central and South America and Spain; refugees and political exiles from Cuba; migrant American citizens from Puerto Rico and their U.S.-born grandchildren; and, an indigenous population whose presence in the United States dates back to the Sixteenth Century as well as to later day migratory waves - the Mexican American.

Many latina women fit the historical pattern of the immigrant, seeking to improve their economic status. Some have followed the male-led exodus as political exiles fleeing from an adversary political regime. Others are born or raised here, the second, third or fourth generation of minority populations. And yet others have come to pursue higher education, or a husband, or both, and have established themselves in a new environment. All at some point or another are prone to the transplant mentality, the displaced feeling that although being here in reality they do not belong.

We see then, how "the Hispanics", although homologous in denomination, reflect a heterogeneous mass of persons from the former Spanish colonies and the Spanish language nations of the world, countries diverse in social and

cultural modalities, with differences in historical development, ancestry, language and racial composition, levels of urbanization, and experiences in government. The diversity among the Latin American nations, point of origin for the ethnic groups known as "Hispanic", does not obviate fundamental commonalities. These elements, best examined elsewhere,[4] are rooted in the colonial social structures and political institutions entrenched throughout three hundred years of Spanish rule, and their continuance long after the former colonies achieved their identity as twenty independent nations. And it is that qualified generalization which is of interest for the study of the female in the "generic" Latin America. Although originating from countries exhibiting significant cultural differences among them, certain myths, such as that of female passivity and powerlessness, have reality only in terms of classes, or subgroups, within and across those different cultures, and of course, among individuals. Within subgroups and classes the tendency has been toward uniform norms. "A pattern based more on 'class' than 'cultural' similarities and differences seems to emerge from these social sciences articles...Class is a major concern, and one of the themes which emerges in the volume is the similarities of attitudes, roles, and behaviors in classes across cultures."[5] Thus, we can cite the names of many upper class women successful in professional activities and in political life in Argentina, Chile, the Dominican Republic, and many other countries. In Puerto Rico, for example, women such as Lola Rodríguez de Tío, poet and political activist author of La Borinqueña; Mariana Bracetti, revolutionary; Ana Roque de Duprey, journalist and feminist; Ana Otero, pianist; María Cadilla de Martínez, educator; Felisa Rincón de Gautier, mayor of San Juan during 23 years; and

legislators, public officials and many others.

Working class women, on the other hand, retain the influence in the family that being bread winners has afforded them. But it is they and the middle class women who encountered the greatest obstacles for socio-economic participation. Today, in many Latin American countries, middle class women are at the forefront of "women's" movements. An example, in Uruguay "Nueva Acción Femenina", a feminist advocacy newspaper, highlights international news and achievements of women; Puerto Rico has its publication, "El Tacón de la Chancleta". Argentinian Esther Vilar writes in Germany and Peruvian playwright Estela Luna has seen her feminist works performed in the United States.

This surge of activities could well be a function of the slight increase in the participation by women in higher education in Latin America--from 27 percent in 1960 to 35 percent in 1970--and in secondary education where participation rose to 48.6 percent for the same year.[6] Despite the increase, however, women's integration in education is still inadequate, documented by a 31 percent illiteracy rate for women in 1970, the lower rate of participation in intermediate education (42.5 percent); and the vast disparity among countries, and rural and urban areas therein. The educational system overall is characterized by: a parallel but economically, racially and/or religious divergent systems of public and private institutions; diversity in educational policies ranging from the liberal to the highly centralized; the perception of secondary education as a luxury; the responsibility for formal education falling upon the family as much as on the government. The education of women, then can more easily respond to prevalent attitudes and the image held of women (what they are supposed to be and the role they are supposed to play), as opposed to what they really are. As a result, over fifty percent of the women enrolled in higher education in 1970 were taking courses in the humanities, education or law. And female enrollment is higher than male (ranging

from 58 to 61 percent) in secondary commercial education, which includes clerical training, and much lower than male in vocational and agricultural intermediate schools teaching trades and crafts. Those statistics in part answer one of the age-old questions in education: "Education for what?"

In Puerto Rico, a recent study on sexism in the classroom, based on an analysis of eleven textbooks used in the public schools in Grades 1-5 (and widely used in bilingual programs in the United States!), revealed many elements in which females are portrayed in a disadvantaged position: for example, the percentage of female characters presented decreases as the grade level rises, from 32.2 percent in first grade textbooks to 11.2 percent in fifth grade texts; the reverse tendency was seen for male characters; the male characters perform 57 different roles and occupations, females are shown in 18 different occupations; and women are portrayed as housewives 35.1 percent of the time.[7]

Clearly, Latin American women, from the elementary grades up, receive an education which perpetuates traditional roles and social norms, roles other than becoming self-reliant by entering the world of work.

A Profile

There is no doubt that the Hispanic woman in the United States is a stable and growing presence in this nation. Three factors serve to illustrate this. First, the Hispanic population in the United States is a young population. In 1976, 49 percent of the Hispanic population was under 18 years of age, while 31 percent of the entire U.S. population was under 18 years of age.[8] Second is the annual increase in the population of national immigrants. About 36 percent of the persons admitted to the U.S. in 1976 were under the age of 20, and more than half of these were persons from Spanish-speaking countries.[9]

Of the 398,613 immigrants who arrived in 1967, 213,750 were female.[10] Lastly, rough computations by the Bureau of the Census indicate an approximate rate of natural increase of about 1.8 percent per year or 10.8 percent for the period between 1970 and 1976.[11]

Today, Hispanic women in the U.S. are concentrated in clerical and service occupations -- 34.9 percent in clerical and 21.1 percent in service occupations. In the service occupations there are substantial differences among ethnic Hispanic groups. While 26.1 percent of the Mexican American women were service workers, only 10.9 percent of the Puerto Rican women were employed as service workers.

Among persons of Spanish origin there is marked difference of income by sex, especialy in higher incomes. While 17 percent of Hispanic men had incomes between $10,000 and $15,000 only 2 percent of the women were in this range. This difference in incomes is also reflected in types of occupations: 7 percent of Hispanic men are employed as managers and administrators and only 3 percent of Hispanic women are in those professions.

Educational attainment for persons of Spanish origin is rising among younger generations. Of Hispanic women 15 to 29 years, 83.5 percent had completed 4 years of high school or more, while for the total female Hispanic population, only 37.3 percent had completed 4 or more years of high school. Large differences are also evident among Hispanic groups when only 53.5 percent of Mexican women 25 to 29 have completed 4 or more years of high school for the same period. Differences in educational attainment are also reflected in income. The median income for all Hispanic women is $3,385, while the median income for Mexican American women is $2,750. Gains in educational attainment, however, are not well reflected on the basis of income when

compared with Hispanic men. Hispanic men had a median income of $8,853, more than twice that of Hispanic women. This was consistent across all Hispanic groups and within age levels. This is most discouraging since the median educational attainment for Hispanic women (10.0 years) was only slightly less than that of Hispanic men (10.3 years).

Currently there are 2.5 million Hispanic families in the U.S. One-fourth of these families had incomes below the poverty level. For families headed by a woman, half had incomes below the poverty level.

This situation is further compounded by the larger number of children in the Hispanic family with average family size of 4.19 members as compared to 3.37 for the U.S. population as a whole.[12]

The problems confronted by Hispanic women are neither solely minority, Hispanic, nor female in nature. So that, while Hispanic women may share many attributes with other women, or her ethnic groups, stigmas imposed by the society at large and by her very social structure places her in the unique status of a minority among minorities. Although, in fact, she represents a majority within the Hispanic communities. And she bears the triple brunt of sexism, racism and colonialism.

The Hispanic woman suffers the additional burdens resulting not only from inequities in the U.S. social institutions and the sexual inequalities perpetuated in Hispanic cultures, but is a victim of the manifestations of the oppression in the form of poverty, prejudice and the rejection by the society at large of her non-Anglo Saxon cultural heritage. Clearly, preservation of our linguistic and cultural identity represents only a fraction of the total concerns for social justice.

The result of that oppression for women from Hispanic communities has been frustration, anxiety and inadequate perceptions of self; many are now

struggling to develop a positive self-image. And this further acts as an additional burden as they struggle to re-define their own image within a life form of isolation or anonymity, rejecting the majority culture's definition of them, but retaining low expectancy levels and low self-esteem. It appears almost certain that the self-fulfilling prophesy operates to the great detriment of the Hispanic woman.

These findings, as summarized, then, come as no surprise:

- o There is a substantial difference in the intensity of pressure resulting from the discrimination received by latinas as compared to male minorities and female whites. The Hispanic woman faces the oppression of sexist discrimination within a racially unbalanced society. Moreover, she receives the oppression forced upon her by males of her ethnic or national origin group who many times displace the anxiety of their oppression on the females of their group.

- o The incidence of poverty is greatest among Hispanic females, (with the exception of Cuban women), for every socio-economic index as compared to either white females or latino males.

- o The Hispanic woman, in addition, often confronts language discrimination.

- o The educational attainment of Hispanic females is lower than for other females and slighly lower than the attainment of Hispanic males.

We see, then, some of the reasons why the study of racial and ethnic groups in our society cannot ignore fifty percent of the membership of that group. By examining the female within that group, we observe that it is not enough to point our finger at the larger society for perpetrating inequities on latinos while that same group is participating in similar inequities toward latina

females. However, the situation of minority women cannot be separated from that of our racial, ethnic and language minorities; the conditions of latino men and women are intertwined and, as such, the study of women is an integral part of the study of the relationships of a minority community to an oppressive larger society. Latina women cannot achieve full emancipation without that of men. Tradition and social structures and institutions have shackled both men and women.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Cisler, Lucinda. Women: A Bibliography, 1968, 1969, 1970. Box 240, New York, N.Y., 10024, n.d.

[2]United Nations. "World Plan of Action". New York, 1975.

[3]U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Characteristics, Persons of Spanish Origin in the United States, March 1976. Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974.

[4]For a comprehensive analysis of Latin American social, economic and political institutions, see Lambert, Jacques, America Latina: Estructuras sociales e instituciones politicas, Barcelona, Ediciones Ariel, 1964.

[5]Pescatello, Ann, ed. Female and Male in Latin America: Essays. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973, p. xvii.

[6]Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission of Women. Special Committee for Studies and Recommendations of the Inter-American Commission of Women for the World Conference of International Women's Year (CEERCIM). Washington, D.C., 1975. p. 113-151.

[7]Commission for the Improvement of Women's Rights. Sexism in the Classroom: Final Report to the Women's Educational Equity Act Program. n.p., October 1977. p. 1-10.

[8]U.S. Bureau of the Census, op. cit., p.1.

[9]U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education Programs. Hearings. 94th Congress, 1st Session, 1975, p. 31.

[10]Immigration and Naturalization Service. 1976 Annual Report. Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978, p. 6.

[11]U.S. Bureau of the Census, op. cit., p. 16.

[12]Ibid., p. 8-28.